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ABSTRACT

A study described how two eighth grade English teachers in a rural junior-senior high school established classroom rules, both formally and informally. The focus of the study and analysis of data were guided by three research questions: (1) What are the formal and informal classroom rules and how are they made visible? (2) Who are the sources of influence in shaping classroom rules? and (3) What are the effects of the rules on students' social and academic behavior? Four characteristics of smoothly functioning classrooms emerged from the data: (1) teacher rapport; (2) teacher proficiency in establishing and maintaining classroom rules and consequences; (3) teacher proficiency in instruction and academic knowledge; and (4) teacher daily planning and preparation. Teacher A was not as proficient in her teaching strategies as Teacher B, and Teacher B was not as proficient in establishing rapport with her students as Teacher A. Also discussed are role dilemmas that face teacher educator/researchers in reporting "sensitive" findings. (JMK)

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ROLE DILEMMAS OF THE PROFESSIONAL EDUCATOR AS RESEARCHER: BLESSING OR CURSE?

by

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ROLE DILEMMAS OF THE PROFESSIONAL EDUCATOR AS RESEARCHER: BLESSING OR CURSE?

A central dilemma for the teacher educator as researcher is the reporting of sensitive findings at the site studied. How is the release of these findings negotiated?

The Problem

The whole issue of classroom discipline is ensnared in confusion due to conflicting theoretical perspectives (Wolfgang and Glickman, 1980; Duke, 1980; Pinar, 1975). Moreover, empirical studies have focused on the individual elements involved in both discipline and rule formation but have not viewed the interactions of all the elements and persons involved in a holistic nature (Stanard, 1982). Additionally, those studies that have been conducted have focused primarily on elementary classrooms and little research reflects the nature of rule formation and classroom discipline in secondary classrooms (Brophy, 1982). This study was designed to describe the interactions of all the people involved in establishing classroom rules in two junior high school English classes in order to understand how classroom discipline is achieved and its subsequent effects on classroom life.

The Study

The purpose of the study (Stanard, 1983) was to describe how two eighth grade English teachers in a rural junior-senior

high school established classroom rules, both formally and informally. The focus of the study and analysis of data were guided by three overarching research questions:

1) What are the formal and informal classroom rules and how are they made visible?

2) Who are the sources of influence in shaping the classroom rules?

3) What are the effects of the rules on students' social and academic behavior?

As data were collected and analyzed, four characteristics of a smoothly functioning classroom emerged. These included:

1) teacher rapport

2) teacher proficiency in establishing and maintaining classroom rules and consequences

3) teacher proficiency in instruction and academic knowledge

4) teacher daily planning and preparation

While both teachers in the study had relatively smoothly functioning classrooms, Teacher A had fewer disruptions due to student misbehavior than Teacher B. She had excellent rapport with her students and spent the first day of school welcoming students and providing a course overview. Formal classroom rules and consequences were presented the second day. Moreover, in the following two weeks, she invoked the consequences consistently and placed phone calls to parents of students who misbehaved. Teacher A's instruction was primarily

round robin reading followed by students responding to questions at the end of the chapter. While 100% of the students stated on surveys that they liked and respected Teacher A, several students responded they wanted more challenging English class assignments and homework. Many of these students spent 20-30% of the class period waiting quietly for other classmates to finish their assignments.

Teacher B had more class disruptions due to student misbehavior than Teacher A. In part, this was due to the class composition. Teacher B's class had more students with histories of behavior problems and students who scored 25% lower on standardized tests than students in Teacher A's class. Teacher B spent the first day and subsequent ten days of the school year establishing formal classroom rules. She did not readily invoke the consequences, however, but relied on "prewarnings" alerting students that the consequence could be invoked. Teacher B utilized a variety of teaching strategies which Gage (1978) and others (Peterson and Walberg, 1979) describe as effective. She was expert in the academic content area and insisted that students be on task. Students responded on surveys that Teacher B was a "good" teacher, but several students stated that she was "mean" and that they would enjoy a little free time on occasion.

Both teachers were prepared daily and were proficient in establishing classroom rules and consequences. Teacher A, however, was not as proficient in her teaching strategies as Teacher B, and Teacher B was not as proficient in establishing rapport with

her students as Teacher A.

Role Dilemmas in the Field

The principal requested that I share the research findings with the entire staff since all of them are following the same school-wide discipline plan (Canter & Canter, 1983) as the two teachers in the study. I agreed at the beginning of the study to provide a workshop, but said I would only release findings that the teachers in the study group were willing to share. The findings related to rapport and student perceptions of teaching strategies appear to be relevant to the staff, however, and the data suggests that aspects of the school-wide discipline program are creating problems in many classrooms. As a teacher educator I could provide staff training derived from the research findings. As a researcher I am bound to protect the confidentiality of my subjects and feel limited in what I may present.

A second sensitive finding is that an informal rule related to the curriculum emerged in both Teacher A's and Teacher B's classrooms. This unstated rule was that <u>form</u> is the <u>substance</u> of the curriculum. Teachers stressed form and structural elements of an assignment and never dealt with the <u>meaning</u> of a film, writing or grammar assignment. Three-fourths of the students who were interviewed did not see how English would benefit them in their personal or professional lives. This informal rule appeared to be reflected throughout the school, largely due to the organizational structure of the school with its emphasis on subject matter specialization,

compartmentalized learning (Cusick, 1973), and the school board's dictate on "back to basics."

As a teacher educator I could recommend methods of integrating curriculum and provide staff training in how to help students derive meaning from content. As a researcher, how may I share this sensitive finding yet protect the teachers in the study?

The last sensitive finding is related to the conflict between the school board and administration and its subsequent influence which shapes behavior in the classroom. While the school board states it desires an orderly school, it has eliminated several proactive discipline programs and the funds to support them. These include an in-house suspension program, staff training programs, and reducing the position of the assistant principal to a part-time basis. If the role of assistant principal is eliminated altogether, the principal stated he will no longer be able to function as an instructional leader but will become the "sheriff" in the building reacting to discipline problems. Since the school board will be present when research findings are made known, how do I indicate that the data suggest inservice training and instructional supervision are needed? My concern is that Teachers A and B will be blamed for problems that are both systemic and pervasive.

Questions for the Teacher Educator as Researcher when Reporting Sensitive Findings within the Site being Studied

Reporting sensitive findings in the site is a challenge for most researchers. Many researchers believe that their responsibility to persons in the setting has been completed once the findings have been reported. This obligation is incomplete for the teacher educator, however. Her training includes not only reporting data based on observations, but in utilizing this data to provide further staff education, goal setting and further observations. She may be accustomed to training administrators as well so that they not only provide subsequent educational experiences for the staff, but also provide support through supervision.

The dual role of teacher educator/researcher appears to be neither a blessing nor a curse in reporting sensitive findings. It produces, rather, a professional challenge and creative tension which raises these questions;

1) Where does my responsibility begin and end?

2) How may I best utilize my training in both disciplines to be useful and productive with participants in the site?

3) To which audience should sensitive findings be addressed -- the subjects in the study, their administrators, colleagues and school board, and/or the larger education community?

I invite you to explore these questions with me as I prepare to report the findings of my study Rule-Making: How classroom rules were formulated both formally and informally in two eighth grade English classes in a rural junior-senior high school (1983) to people in the site.

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